

IX

The Structure of Bad Taste

Bad taste shares the same lot that Croce saw as characteristic of art: everybody knows what it is and how to detect and predicate it, but nobody knows how to define it. For this, it is often necessary to turn to the experts, the connoisseurs, people "with taste," on the basis of whose behavior we can then define good or bad taste, in relation to particular cultural settings.

At times we recognize bad taste instinctively, in the irritation we feel when confronted by an obvious lack of proportion, or by something that seems out of place—a tactless remark (what we commonly know as a gaffe) or unjustified pomposity: "It was dynamic hatred and loathing, coming strong and black out of the unconsciousness. She heard his words in her unconscious self, *consciously* she was as if deafened, she paid no heed to them"; "Her subtle, feminine, demoniacal soul knew it well" (both examples courtesy of D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love*). In all these cases, bad taste manifests itself as a lack of measure, a "measure" that is itself very difficult to define, since it varies from place to place and from age to age.

On the other hand, it would be hard to find anything in worse taste than the funerary sculptures of the Cimitero Monumentale in Milan, or Forest Lawn in Los Angeles. And yet, these perfectly legitimate Canovian exercises, representing Pain, Pity, Forgetfulness, etc., can hardly be accused of lacking measure. Formally speaking, this is certainly not their problem. If lack of measure there is, it has nothing to do with the form of the object but rather with history or with circumstances: to imitate Canova in the middle of the twentieth century makes little sense, even though a representation of Pain cannot be considered out of place in a cemetery. What *can* be considered if not out of place at least tactless is the

implicit prescription of the right attitude to assume in that particular circumstance. For the statue is essentially telling us how we should view a visit to somebody's grave, thus leaving us little room for the individual expression of our own personal moods and feelings.

This last example leads us to another possible definition of bad taste, widely accepted, which does not seem to involve any immediate reference to measure, and pertains especially to art: the prefabrication and imposition of an effect.

German culture, maybe in an effort to exorcise a familiar ghost, has devoted particular attention to the study and definition of this phenomenon, for which it has invented a new category, that of Kitsch, so precise as to be nearly untranslatable and, as such, known by the same name in every language.¹

A Stylistics of Kitsch

The sea whispers in the distance, and in the enchanted silence the wind gently ruffles the stiffened leaves. An opaque silken gown, embroidered with gold and ivory, flowed along her limbs, revealing a smooth sinuous neck swathed in fiery tresses. No light yet burned in Brunhilde's solitary chamber; slender palms rose out of precious Chinese vases like dark, fantastic shadows, in the midst of which flashed, white, the marmoreal bodies of ancient, ghostly statues. Barely visible, on the walls, lurked the subdued glimmer of gold-framed paintings. Brunhilde, her hands softly gliding over the keyboard of the piano at which she was seated, was lost in sweet reflection. Thus, music flowed in somber search, like veils of smoke rising out of incandescent ashes, frayed by the wind, swirling and soaring in fantastic tatters, away from the inessential flame. Slowly and majestically the melody rose, bursting into powerful accents, folding back onto itself with the pleading, enchanting, ineffably sweet voices of children and angelic choirs, whispering above nocturnal forests and solitary vales, ample, ardent, fraught with ancient steles, playing through forlorn rural cemeteries. Clear meadows are thus disclosed, the slender-bodied games of spring, while autumn lurks behind an evil old hag seated under a shower of leaves. It will soon be winter; large bright angels, as tall as heaven above the snow, will bow

over the listening shepherds and will sing about the wondrous child of Bethlehem.

A heavenly enchantment, full of the secrets of the holy Christmas, is thus woven around the wintry vale sunk in peaceful slumber, like the faraway song of a harp, estranged by the noise of day, like the secret of sadness singing of the divine origin. Outside, the nocturnal wind caresses the golden house with tender hands, and stars wander through the wintry night.

This passage is not merely a pastiche but a malicious collage by Walther Killy,² consisting of six fragments from as many German authors: five renowned producers of literary pulp, plus an "outsider," who I regret to say is none other than Rilke. As Killy points out, it is not easy to trace the composite origin of the passage, since the characteristic that is common to all six fragments is their desire to produce a sentimental effect, or rather, to offer it to the reader once it has already been exhausted, and duly packaged in such a way that its objective content (the wind at night? a girl at the piano? the birth of the Savior?) remains concealed behind its basic *Stimmung*, as a secondary concern. The main intent here is to create a lyrical atmosphere, and in order to do so the authors use expressions that are already charged with poetic connotations, as well as random elements that already possess in themselves the power to excite emotions (the wind, the night, the sea). But this does not seem to be enough for the authors, who, obviously mistrusting the evocative power of each individual word, seem to have stuffed every expression with reiterations so as to protect the effect against any possible leak. Thus, the silence in which the sea whispers will be "enchanted," and the hands of the wind, as if their tenderness weren't enough, will "caress," while the house above which the stars wander will be "golden."

Killy also calls attention to the "fungibility" of the stimulus, its tendency to spread and grow all over the place—in other words, its redundancy. The passage he quotes has all the characteristics of the redundant message, in which one stimulus supports another by means of accumulation and repetition, since each individual stimulus, corroded by lyrical use, might need extra help to achieve the desired effect.

The verbs (whispers, flows, glides, wanders) contribute to stress the "liquidity" of the text (the condition of its lyricism), so that at

every step one has a sense of the transience, the ephemerality of the effect, always on the point of dissolving in its own echo but never allowed to do so.

Killy cites the example of great poets who have occasionally felt the need to rely on lyrical evocation, even if (as in the case of Goethe) this meant grafting verse onto prose in order to suddenly reveal an essential trait of the story which the narrative, articulated according to a certain logic, was unable to express. But with Kitsch, a change of tone has no cognitive function; it merely reinforces the sentimental stimulus, so that, in the end, this sort of episodic insertion becomes the norm.

Given the way in which it articulates itself, like any other artistic communication whose project is not that of involving the reader in an act of discovery but that of forcing him to register a particular effect (in the belief that therein lies aesthetic pleasure), Kitsch would seem to be some sort of artistic hoax, or, as Hermann Broch puts it, "the element of evil in the value system of art."³

As an easily digestible substitute for art, Kitsch is the ideal food for a lazy audience that wants to have access to beauty and enjoy it without having to make too much of an effort. According to Killy, Kitsch is largely a petty bourgeois phenomenon, the cultural pretense of a public that believes it can enjoy an original representation of the world whereas in fact it can only appreciate a secondary imitation of the primary power of the images.

Killy seems to be part of that critical tradition which has spread from Germany to a number of Anglo-Saxon countries and which, having defined Kitsch as a petty bourgeois phenomenon, has identified it with the most glaring expressions of mass culture—of an average, consumer culture.

On the other hand, Broch himself doubts whether any kind of art would exist without at least one drop of Kitsch, and Killy wonders whether the false representation of the world offered by Kitsch is, in fact, only a lie, or whether it doesn't actually satisfy man's unquenchable thirst for illusion. And when he refers to Kitsch as "art's natural son," he deliberately lets us suspect that the presence of this natural son, capable of producing an effect the moment the consumer demands it instead of venturing into the much more difficult and exclusive production of a much more complex and responsible aesthetic pleasure, may well be essential to artistic life as

well as to the destiny of art in society. Arguments such as these are often based on a rather ahistorical notion of art, for in fact it would be enough to consider the function fulfilled by art in other historical contexts to realize that the fact that a work is capable of producing an immediate effect has never been a reason to exclude such a work from the realm of art. If one is to believe Aristotle, in Greece art had the function of producing a psychological effect; such was, at least, the function of both music and tragedy. Whether in that particular context there was actually another meaning given to the concept of aesthetic pleasure, involving the appreciation of the form through which the effect is realized, is another question. Suffice it to say that in certain societies art is so deeply integrated with daily life that its primary function is precisely that of provoking particular reactions (ludic, religious, erotic) as effectively as possible.

The production of an effect becomes Kitsch in a cultural context in which art is seen not as technical ability (as was the case in ancient Greece and in the Middle Ages) but rather as something produced for art's sake. According to this definition, any process that, using "artistic" means, aims at achieving a heteronomous end would fall under the more generic rubric of an "artisticity" that can assume a variety of forms but that should not be confused with art. No matter how much art I might pour into the creation of a cookie, it will never be anything more than a mere effect of artisticity, since in order to be art (in the noblest sense of the term) it would have to be appreciated for its style rather than desired for its taste.⁴

But what allows us to say that an object whose artisticity seems to have a heteronomous end is by definition in bad taste?

A dress designed so as to enhance the charms of its wearer is not, by definition, a product of bad taste (though it would be if it drew the attention of the viewer only to the more obvious attributes of the wearer, thus reducing her personality to a mere prop for one particular physical trait). But if the production of an effect is not in itself enough to constitute an instance of Kitsch, then something else must be needed. This something else emerges out of Killy's analysis the moment we realize that the passage he has brought to our attention wants to be considered as art. And we realize it because of the way it ostentatiously employs modes of expression that have previously appeared in works traditionally considered as

works of art. In other words, Killy's passage is Kitsch not only because it aims at producing sentimental effects but also because it is constantly trying to convince its readers that if they enjoy these effects, then they will share a privileged aesthetic experience.

To become a piece of Kitsch, a passage needs more than the linguistic factors intrinsic to the message: it also needs the author's intent to sell it to his audience, and the audience's intent to appreciate it. Broch is right when he says that Kitsch does not concern art so much as a certain kind of behavior, or a certain kind of person, a "Kitsch-man" who needs such a form of falsehood so that he can recognize himself in it. If we agree with this, then Kitsch will appear as a negative force, a constant mystification, an eternal escape from the responsibilities involved in the experience of art. As the theologian R. Egenter used to say, the Father of Lies would use Kitsch to alienate the masses from all notion of salvation, because he would recognize it as much more powerful, in its mystifying and consoling power, even than scandals, since these have a tendency to awaken the moral defenses of the virtuous at the very moment in which they are most effectively attacking them.⁵

Kitsch and Mass Culture

The definition of Kitsch as a communication aiming at the production of an immediate effect has certainly helped to identify it with mass culture, and to set it in dialectic opposition to the "high" culture proposed by the avant-garde.

The culture industry appeals to a generic mass of consumers (for the most part quite unaware of the complexities of specialized cultural life) by selling them ready-made effects, which it prescribes along with directions for their use and a list of the reactions they should provoke. This technique is very similar to the one used in the sixteenth century to hawk popular prints. Even then, emotional appeal was the best way to awaken the public's need for a certain product. From the titles of sixteenth-century popular prints to today's slogans, via nineteenth-century romances and popular novels, the procedure has not changed a great deal. As a result, while petty bourgeois and mass culture (both fully industrialized) are more interested in the presumed effects of a work of art rather than in the work itself, artists have moved to the opposite extreme: what they

care about is neither the work nor its effects but the process that leads to both.

According to Clement Greenberg's felicitous formula, "Avant-garde imitates the processes of art; Kitsch imitates its effects," Picasso paints the cause of a possible effect, whereas Repin (an oleographic painter particularly favored by Soviet cultural policy under Stalin) paints the effect of a possible cause. Whereas the avant-garde stresses the importance of the processes that lead to the work and turns them into the very object of its discourse, Kitsch focuses on the reactions that the work should provoke in its audience and sees these as its very *raison d'être*.⁶ This definition is very much related to that new stance of contemporary criticism according to which, from Romanticism to our own day, poetry has increasingly assumed the traits of a metapoetry (a discourse on poetry and its potential). As a result, today's poetics are much more important than the works themselves, since, after all, the works are nothing more than discourses on their own poetics, or, better yet, *are* their own poetics.⁷

Greenberg, however, does not seem to realize that Kitsch is not the consequence of a rise in the cultural level of the elite; rather, the opposite is true. The industry of a culture geared toward mass consumption and based on the production of easy effects was born before the invention of print. Popular culture spreads when elite culture is still very much in touch with the sensibility and language of society as a whole. Artists begin feeling a different vocation as the industry of mass culture acquires ascendancy and society is invaded by easily consumable messages. Art begins to elaborate the project of an avant-garde (even though the term may not yet have been coined) when popular novels are satisfying the masses' needs for escape and cultural elevation, and when photography starts fulfilling both the commemorative and the practical functions that were once the province of painting. According to many, the crisis was first felt in the middle of the nineteenth century. As Nadar succeeded in satisfying the bourgeois's need to contemplate his or her own features and bequeath them to posterity, the Impressionist painter was free to experiment outdoors, to paint not what people thought they saw but the very process of perception, the very interaction between light and matter that constitutes the act of vision.⁸ It is not by chance that the problematics of poetry about poetry was

already evident at the beginning of the nineteenth century: with the birth of journalism and the diffusion of the popular novel in the eighteenth century, the phenomenon of mass culture became a real threat to poets, who, foreseeing the worst, decided to do something about it before it was too late.

As I have already suggested, if Kitsch were nothing more than a series of messages emitted by the culture industry to satisfy certain demands without palming them off as art, there would be no dialectic relationship between Kitsch and the avant-garde. According to some, to consider mass culture a surrogate for art is a misunderstanding that circumvents the real question. And, indeed, if we considered mass communication to be the intense circulation of a network of messages that contemporary society needs for a complex number of reasons, one of which is the satisfaction of a certain taste, then we would no longer find any relationship—any scandalous contradiction between art and a news broadcast, a TV commercial, a road sign, or an interview with the President.⁹ This sort of misunderstanding is common among those who decide to elaborate an "aesthetics" of television without bothering to distinguish between television as a generic medium of information, a service, and television as a specific medium of communication with artistic pretensions. What would be the point of debating whether the effect produced by a road sign, whose purpose is to caution motorists, or by a commercial, which aims at the diffusion of a particular product, is in good or bad taste? This is not what is at issue in either case. In the case of the road sign, the issue is civic and pedagogical; psychological pressure is used in order to achieve an end approved by an entire society, for a situation in which, given the psychological state of the average driver, a more rational message would not suffice. In the case of the commercial, the issue is moral, economic, and political, since it concerns the legitimacy of using psychological pressure in order to make a profit.

But the question of the dialectics between Kitsch and the avant-garde is not solved by eschewing all aesthetic evaluation in favor of more serious concerns such as the ones considered above. Quite the contrary, for not only does the avant-garde emerge as a reaction to the diffusion of Kitsch, but Kitsch keeps renewing itself and thriving on the very discoveries of the avant-garde. While the latter, refusing to serve as an experimental laboratory for an ever-growing

cultural industry, is constantly concocting new forms, the former, relentlessly stimulated by the new ideas of the avant-garde, keeps processing, adapting, and diffusing these according to its commercial standards, in the process changing them from procedural forms which try to direct the audience's attention to the causes of their being, into effect-producing formulas.

From this particular standpoint, the anthropological situation of mass culture would seem to hinge on a perpetual dialectic between innovative ideas and acceptable adjustments, in which the former are constantly betrayed by the latter, since the greater part of the public is convinced that it is enjoying the first, whereas it is actually enjoying the second.

Midcult

But the dialectic between the avant-garde and Kitsch is not nearly so simple as this. Theoretically speaking, the formulation of the problem may appear persuasive enough, but before we accept it we should look at a few concrete cases. Let's examine, for instance, some of the lowest examples of mass culture, such as the production of funerary or votive lamps, porcelain knickknacks representing little sailors and sultry odalisques, comic book heroes, detective stories, B westerns. In all these cases, we have a message that aims at the production of an effect (excitement, escape, melancholy, joy, and so on) and assumes the formative procedures of art. In most cases, the most skillful authors will borrow new elements and unusual solutions from the higher culture. And yet, generally speaking, the addresser of the message does not expect the addressee to consider his communication a work of art; nor does he wish that the elements he has borrowed from the avant-garde be recognized and appreciated as such. He has used them only because he thought they might serve his purposes. This does not mean, however, that in creating his porcelain odalisques he may not have vaguely felt the influence of a decadent movement, or responded to the lure of archetypes ranging all the way from Beardsley's *Salomé* to Gustave Moreau's; just as, responding to similar references, his customer may well end up placing the knickknack in the middle of his living room as a token of culture, a status symbol, a mark of "higher" taste, etc. But when an adman borrows some avant-garde proce-

dure to pitch a particular drink or a new car model, or when Tin Pan Alley transforms Beethoven's "Für Elise" into a dance tune, the use of the cultural product is meant for a consumption that has nothing to do with, and does not pretend to have anything to do with, an aesthetic experience. On the other hand, it is possible that while enjoying such a product the consumer may catch on to a particular phrase, a stylistic element that has kept some of the original's nobility. Even though he may not know where the phrase comes from, he might enjoy its formal arrangement, its function, and in the process take delight in an aesthetic experience which, however, does not claim to replace other, "higher" experiences. These examples open up a different set of issues (the legitimacy of advertising, the pedagogical and social functions of dance) that have little or nothing to do with the problematics of Kitsch. We are dealing with mass products that aim at the production of effects without pretending to be art.

The keenest critics of mass culture have realized this. And, in fact, they have viewed all such "functional" products as phenomena unworthy of being analyzed (since these phenomena do not concern problems of aesthetics, they can have no interest for the cultivated mind) and have instead turned their attention to a different level of cultural consumption: that of the "middle."

According to Dwight MacDonald, the lowest level of mass culture (which he terms "Masscult") finds in its very banality a deep historical impulse, a savage strength similar to that of the early capitalism described by Marx and Engels. It is a "dynamic, revolutionary force, breaking down the old barriers of class, tradition, and taste, dissolving all cultural distinctions. It mixes, scrambles everything together, producing what might be called homogenized culture . . . Masscult is very, very democratic." (In other words, in its thoughtless functionality, Masscult, even though it might follow the models of the avant-garde, never even bothers to refer to a "higher" culture, nor does it bother its audience with it.)

This is certainly not the case with Midcult, Masscult's pretentious bastard, a "corruption of High Culture, which has the enormous advantage over Masscult that, while also in fact 'totally subjected to the spectator,' it is able to pass itself off as the real thing . . . Midcult has the essential qualities of Masscult—the formula, the built-in reaction, the lack of any standard except popularity—

but it decently covers them with a cultural figleaf." To understand what MacDonald means by "Midcult," it is worth following him in his cruel but keen analysis of Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*.¹⁰

It is indeed possible to follow the dialectics between Kitsch and the avant-garde just by examining Hemingway's opus: at the beginning, his writing is very clearly a means of discovering reality, but by and by, and despite a seemingly unaltered appearance, it bends to the demands of an audience that wants to have access to such an exciting writer. MacDonald quotes the beginning of one of Hemingway's first short stories, "The Undefeated," a bullfighting story he wrote in the 1920s when "he was knocking them out of the park": "Manuel Garcia climbed the stairs to Don Miguel Retana's office. He set down his suitcase and knocked on the door. There was no answer. Manuel, standing in the hallway, felt there was someone in the room. He felt it through the door." Vintage Hemingway. Only a few words—the situation is rendered through the attitudes of its characters. The theme is that of an old-timer getting one last chance. The beginning of *The Old Man and the Sea* also introduces us to an old-timer getting one last chance:

He was an old man who fished alone in a skiff in the Gulf Stream and he had gone eighty-four days now without taking a fish. In the first forty days a boy had been with him. But after forty days without a fish the boy's parents had told him that the old man was now definitely and finally salao, which is the worst form of unlucky, and the boy had gone at their orders in another boat which caught three good fish the first week. It made the boy sad to see the old man come in each day with his skiff empty and he always went down to help him carry either the coiled lines or the gaff and harpoon and the sail that was furled around the mast. The sail was patched with flour sacks and, furled, it looked like the flag of permanent defeat.

MacDonald notes that the passage is written in the fake-biblical prose Pearl Buck used in *The Good Earth* ("a style which seems to have a malign fascination for Midbrows"), with all those "ands" replacing the more usual commas so as to lend the prose the rhythm of an old poem. The characters are generic (the boy, the old man) and will remain so till the end to create the impression that

they are not individuals so much as universal values and that therefore, through them, the reader will undergo a philosophical experience, a profound revelation of reality. "'Undefeated' is fifty-seven pages long, as against *Old Man*'s one hundred and forty; not only does much more happen in it but also one feels that more has happened than is expressed, so to speak, while *Old Man* gives the opposite impression." Not only does *The Old Man* proceed unsteadily along the edge of a false universality, but it also frequently relies on what MacDonald calls "constant editorializing" (in other words, it advertises itself). At a certain point in the book, Hemingway has the old man say: "I'm a strange old man," to which MacDonald ruthlessly retorts, "Prove it, old man, don't say it!" It is not difficult to see why this tale appeals to the average reader: it still has the exterior trappings of the early Hemingway (raw, distant), but here they are diluted and reiterated till they are fully digested. The hypersensitivity of Manuel Garcia, who is by now used to bad luck, is suggested, represented in his feeling, through the closed door, the hostile presence of the elusive impresario. The bad luck of the old man is instead explained to the reader, whose sympathy is nudged by the author's waving in front of his eyes, until they well with tears, that tattered sail that looks like "the flag of permanent defeat" (close kin to the enchanted silence and the subdued glimmer that hover over Brunhilde's chamber in the first quoted passage). On the other hand, no average reader would respond to the persuasive power of that sail if its metaphor did not bring back to his mind the memory of other similar metaphors, from other poetic contexts, that have by now become part of the literary canon. Once the mnemonic short circuit is provoked, and the impression of poeticity registered and felt, the game is over. The reader is aware of having consumed some art and of having recognized Truth in the face of Beauty. At this point, Hemingway is an author that can be appreciated by everybody, and as such worthy of being awarded the Nobel Prize (which, as MacDonald reminds us, had already been awarded to Pearl Buck).

There are representations of the human condition in which this condition is so universalized, not to say generalized, that what we learn about it can be applied to all sorts of experiences and none at all. The fact that this sort of information is often cloaked in the garb of an Aesthetic Experience only confirms its substantial falsehood.

One remembers Broch and Egenter's references to falsehood, and to life reduced to falsehood. In these cases, Midcult becomes synonymous with Kitsch, in the fullest sense of the term. It assumes the function of pure consolation and becomes the stimulus for thoughtless (acritical) evasions: in short, a marketable illusion. On the other hand, if we accept MacDonald's analysis, we must also be wary of the nuances the problem assumes thanks to his keen intuitions. For instance, not all the characteristics of Midcult always occur together. The passage he quotes is a perfect example of Midcult because: (1) it borrows the avant-garde's procedures and bends them out of shape to create a message that can be understood by all; (2) it borrows these procedures after they have already been amply used, and abused, after they are already quite worn out; (3) it constructs the message as a source of effects, (4) sells it as art, and (5) satisfies its consumer by convincing him that he has just experienced culture.

Do all these five conditions always occur in every Midcult product, or is this example a particularly insidious one? Do we still have Midcult if one of these conditions is absent? In his other examples, MacDonald himself seems to waver between different meanings, each of which involves one or more of the five conditions. An example of Midcult is the *Revised Standard Version of the Bible*, "put out several years ago under the aegis of the Yale Divinity School, that destroys our greatest monument of English prose, the King James Version, in order to make the text 'clear and meaningful to people today,' which is like taking apart Westminster Abbey to make Disneyland out of the fragments." In this particular instance, it is fairly clear that MacDonald is much more interested in the aesthetic product than in the improvement of the masses, in their need or their right to understand texts such as the Holy Scriptures (a need which, once recognized, perfectly justifies the publication of the *Revised Standard Version of the Bible* by the Yale Divinity School). In this particular case, Midcult is identified with popularization (point 1), which is then seen as intrinsically bad.

Another example of Midcult is the Book-of-the-Month Club, because it diffuses works such as *The Good Earth* and therefore passes off as art what is in fact only commercial matter (points 4 and 5). *Our Town*, by Thornton Wilder, is also an example of Midcult, since it borrows the Brechtian technique of estrangement in

order to hypnotize and console the audience, not to invite it to participate in a critical process (point 3). But among these examples of Midcult, MacDonald also includes certain products that have reduced old Bauhaus designs into objects of daily use (point 2)—a fact that really shouldn't irritate the critic since, after all, the designers of Bauhaus meant their designs to be diffused at all levels of society. To this, one could object that, in fact, in their author's intentions, the purpose of these designs was to decorate a completely new social and urban setting, and that therefore to use them as mere objects of consumption, in a totally alien context, deprives them of most of their meaning. But this argument is not enough to dispel our suspicion that what really irritates MacDonald is the idea of popularization. In fact, for him, the dialectic between the avant-garde and Midcult is fairly rigid and unidirectional (the passage from High to Mid involves progressive entropy), nor does he ever question the values of "high" art. In other words, he never seems to doubt that the activities of the avant-garde had profound historical motives, and he does not allow for the possibility that some of these motives may have emerged out of the uneasy relationship between the avant-garde and Midcult. For MacDonald "avant-garde" is synonymous with "high" art, the only domain of value; any attempt to mediate its results must be bad, for the very simple reason that the average man, the citizen of modern industrial civilization who requires such mediation, is beyond help. As a result, in MacDonald's view, the formative methods of the avant-garde become dubious the moment they are understood by a majority, a fact which makes one suspect that MacDonald judges the value of a work not just in terms of its nondiffusion but also in terms of its nondiffusibility. In that case, his critique of Midcult may be nothing more than a dangerous initiation into the game of "in" and "out," whereby the moment something that was initially meant for the happy few is appreciated and desired by many, it loses its value as well as its validity.¹¹ But this would mean that criticism is replaced by snobbery and that sociology and the awareness of the demands of the masses have an extraordinary, if negative, ascendancy over the taste and the judgment of the critic: he will never love what the average man loves, but he will always hate what he loves. In either case it is the average public that dictates the law, and the aristocratic critic becomes the victim of his own game.

To let snobbery infiltrate an aesthetic sociology of the consumption of forms is quite dangerous. Formal procedures sooner or later become worn out, but who can decide what are the best criteria for judging consumption? The difference between critical sensibility and snobbery is minimal: a critique of mass culture can be the ultimate and most refined product of mass culture, whereas the "aristocrat," who merely does what others don't yet do, in fact depends entirely on what they do to know what not to do. Abandoned to individual moods, particular palates, and value judgments, the critique of taste becomes a sterile game, likely to produce a few pleasant emotions but unable to tell us much about the cultural phenomena of an entire society. Good and bad taste thus become flimsy categories that may be of absolutely no use in defining the complex functionality of a message within a given group or society. Mass society is so rich in determinations and possibilities, that it acquires an immensely elaborate network of mediations and reactions between a culture of discovery, a culture of mere consumption, and a culture of popularization and mediation, none of which can be easily reduced to a simple definition of Beauty or Kitsch.

All these supercilious condemnations of mass taste, in the name of an ideal community of readers involved solely in discovering the secret beauties of the cryptic messages produced by high art, neglect the average consumer (present in just about all of us) who at the end of the day may resort to a book or a movie in the hope that it may evoke a few basic reactions (laughter, fear, pleasure, sorrow, anger) and, through these, reestablish some balance in his or her physical and intellectual life. A well-balanced cultural context does not require the eradication of this sort of message; it only needs to keep them under control, dose them, and see to it that they are not sold and consumed as art.

The Structure of the Public Message

The production of effects and the popularization of consumed forms: the definition of Kitsch or of Midcult seems to oscillate between these two fundamental poles. The first refers to a formal characteristic of the message; the second, to its historical "destiny," to its sociological dimension.

The two poles can, of course, be brought together and consid-

ered as two corollary aspects of the same situation. When Adorno speaks of the reduction of the musical product to a fetish¹² —and when he points out that this fate befalls not only the popular song but also the artistic product of nobler origins the moment it is popularized—he is trying to tell us that it is not so much a question of knowing whether, listening to a particular composition, the consumer appreciates a message because of the effects it produces in him, as whether, in fact, he appreciates it because he mistakes its obsolete form for that of the original aesthetic experience. According to Adorno, this distinction does not make any difference, since in both cases the average man's relationship to the commercialized artistic product expresses itself in the blind and thoughtless adoration of the fetish. Unable and unwilling to apprehend either good or bad music analytically, he accepts it as it is, as something that it is good to consume because the law of the market has decreed it to be so, thus relieving him of any need to express his own judgment.

This radically negative criticism, which we have already seen to be unproductive, turns mass consumers into a generic fetish and the object of consumption into another, unexplainable fetish, while totally ignoring the great variety of attitudes present at the level of mass consumption.

Consumption and Recovery of Artistic Messages

Any work of art can be viewed as a message to be decoded by an addressee. But unlike most messages, instead of aiming at transmitting a univocal meaning, the work of art succeeds precisely insofar as it appears ambiguous and open-ended. The notion of the open work can be satisfactorily reformulated according to Jakobson's definition of the "poetic" function of language.¹³ Poetic language deliberately uses terms in a way that will radically alter their referential function (by establishing, among them, syntactic relationships that violate the usual laws of the code). It eliminates the possibility for a univocal decoding; it gives the addressee the feeling that the current code has been violated to such an extent that it can no longer help. The addressee thus finds himself in the situation of a cryptographer forced to decode a message whose code is unknown, and who therefore has to learn the code of the message from the message itself.¹⁴ At this point, the addressee will find him-

self so personally involved with the message that his attention will gradually move from the signifieds, to which the message was supposed to refer, to the structure itself of the signifiers, and by so doing will comply with the demands of the poetic message, whose very ambiguity rests on the fact that it proposes itself as the main object of attention: "This emphasis of the message on its own self is called the poetic function."¹⁵ When we speak of art as an autonomous process, as form for form's sake, we are stressing a particular aspect of the artistic message which communication theory and structural linguistics would define as follows: "The set (*Einstellung*) toward the MESSAGE as such, focus on the message for its own sake, is the POETIC function of language."¹⁶

To this extent, ambiguity is not an accessory to the message: it is its fundamental feature. This is what forces the addressee to approach the message in a different fashion, not to use it as a mere vehicle (totally irrelevant once he has grasped the content it is carrying) but rather to see it as a constant source of continually shifting meanings—a source whose typical structure, begging relentlessly to be decoded, is organized so as to coordinate all the addressee's possible decodings and force him to repeatedly question the validity of their interpretations by referring them back to the structure of the message.¹⁷

What matters to us here is to prove that the addressees of a poetic message find themselves in a situation of interpretive tension precisely because the ambiguity of the message, by expressing itself as a violation of the code, comes to them as a surprise. From the very start, the decoding of this sort of message appears as an adventure into an unusual, unpredictable organization of signs that no code could have foreseen. Committed to the discovery of the new code (new because never used before, and yet connected to the common code, which it at once upholds and violates) and bereft of the support of any exterior code, the addressees have to rely on their sensibility and their intelligence to construct their own hypothetical code. Their understanding of the work is a result of this interaction.¹⁸

But once it is understood, introduced into a circuit of constantly enriched perception, the work starts to lose its interest for the addressees, who have gradually grown used to it. The way of forming that was once a violation of the code has become one of its new

possibilities, at least to the extent to which every work of art can modify the cultural habits of a community and render even the most "aberrant" expression acceptable. The poetic message thus ceases to surprise its addressee, who, given his familiarity with it, can now decode it merely by applying to it its most recent interpretation, or a formula that sums it up. Its potential for information has been drained; its stylemes have been exhausted.¹⁹

This fact should be enough to explain the phenomenon commonly known among sociologists as "the consumption of forms" and to clarify the process by which a form becomes a "fetish"—that is, ceases to be appreciated for what it is or can be and instead comes to be coveted for what it represents, for the prestige it is supposed to convey. To love the *Mona Lisa* because it represents Mystery, or Ambiguity, or Ineffable Grace, or the Eternal Feminine, or because it is a more or less "sophisticated" topic of conversation ("Was it really a woman?" "Just think: one more brush stroke and that smile would have been different!") means to accept a particular message not for itself but because of a previous decoding which, having now stiffened into a formula, sticks to the message like a tag. In this case, we are no longer considering Leonardo's painting as a message whose structure is in itself worthy of appreciation, but as a conventional signifier whose signified is a formula diffused by advertising.

We could then say that the term Kitsch can be applied to any object that (a) appears already consumed; (b) reaches the masses, or the average customer, because it is already consumed; and (c) will quickly be reconsumed, because the use to which it has already been put by a large number of consumers has hastened its erosion. Phenomena such as the *Mona Lisa* embroidered on a pillow would only encourage this interpretation.

However, it is impossible to speak of the consumption of poetic messages the way one would speak of the consumption of ordinary messages. A message such as "Do Not Lean Out the Window," commonly affixed below the windows of most European trains, has been repeated and decoded so many times that by now it has lost all effect. To recover some effect, the message needs to be refreshed, reiterated in a novel fashion—for instance, it could be accompanied by a list of the fines incurred by its transgressors, or

sensationalized by means of an unexpected new formula, such as: "Two months ago, Mr. Jones lost his right eye to a protruding branch as he leaned out of this window."

This is not what happens with the poetic message. Its ambiguity is a constant challenge to the absent-minded decipherer, a constant invitation to cryptanalysis. No matter how popularized, consumed, and fetishized, a poetic message will still find someone who will approach it with, as it were, a virginal mind, even if this means that he or she may interpret it *according to a new code that has little or nothing to do with the one initially intended by the author.*

This sort of "misinterpretation" is an inevitable corollary of the "fortunes" of a work of art through the centuries. The Romantic interpretation of the marmoreal "whiteness" of Greece is a perfect example of a message that has been decoded according to an alien code.

Certainly, the reproduction of a famous classical painting bought as a fetish, a status symbol, a cultural alibi, can work for its Kitsch consumer just as the *Mona Lisa* does on a pillow. On the other hand, it is quite possible that, in the course of his inept perusal, this consumer will bump into an aspect of the work—one of the infinite aspects of its structural complexity—that will unexpectedly offer him a tenuous glimpse of a much richer sort of communication, thereby rescuing the work from the basest form of consumption.

Giorgione's *Tempesta*, appreciated only for its most immediately referential aspects (without any of its iconographic connotations—for instance, the shepherd seen as a handsome youth and not as Mercury), Bruegel's *Hay Wagon* taken merely as the imitation of a hay wagon, Manzoni's *The Betrothed* read only in order to know what is going to happen to Renzo and Lucia, the *Wounded Bison* in the caves of Altamira enjoyed merely as a lively sketch of a moving animal with absolutely no reference to its magic function: all these are examples of a partial decoding, yet are nevertheless capable of bringing the viewer closer to the work by revealing to him, albeit in a rudimentary fashion, a few aspects that were part of the author's intention. Throughout the centuries, the life of artworks has been plagued by such misunderstandings, such misreadings, such crass misconceptions, indeed to the point that they almost seem to be the norm; whereas the exemplary decoding (exemplary not because unique, but because rich, complex, and all-encompassing)

often constitutes the ideal criticism. Which only proves that the consumption of a form is not always total and irreversible. Even the structure that is appreciated for only one of its levels will, given the deep kinship that connects all the stylemes to one another, remain intact in the background, like a lurking presence, the unachieved promise of a potentially fuller appreciation.

On the other hand, if an inexact or incomplete reading impoverishes the message, without however entirely obliterating it, the opposite can also occur: a message containing little information, read in the light of an arbitrary code, can often appear much richer than it was meant to be. When the *Wounded Bison* of Altamira is interpreted according to contemporary aesthetic standards, it will automatically acquire a wealth of intentions that for the most part are *contributed by the addressee*. Most archaeological finds are generally interpreted with the help of references that were totally foreign to their authors: the missing arms and the natural erosions of time become the signifiers of an allusive incompleteness fraught with meanings that have been acquired through centuries of culture but were quite unknown to the Greek artisan. And yet, as a system of elements, the object may have also implied this system of signifiers and of possible signifieds. Similarly, to the eyes of an intellectual in search of local lore, certain forms of popular entertainment can appear charged with a Fescennine obscenity of which the comedian is quite unaware; and yet, in his desire to satisfy the presumed taste of his audience, he might have well included in his show a series of references to archetypal behaviors that still function, and are developed and grasped, instinctively.

What happens to a message that is interpreted by means of an overcharged code is very similar to what happens to the *objet trouvé* that the artist pulls out of context and frames as a work of art: in this case, the artist selects certain aspects of the object as the possible signifiers of signifieds that have been elaborated by his cultural tradition. By arbitrarily superimposing a code on a message that has none (a natural object, for instance) or has a different one (some industrial product), the artist in fact reinvents, reformulates, that message. The question here is whether he is arbitrarily imbuing the object with references culled from an extraneous tradition (that of contemporary art, for instance, by virtue of which a stone may resemble a Henry Moore sculpture, and a mechanical assemblage a

work by Jacques Lipchitz) or whether, in fact, it is contemporary art which, in its ways of forming, has included references to natural or industrial modes of being by integrating elements from other codes into its own.²⁰

The addressee's reception can thus alter the informative power of the message. Because of its complex structure, the poetic message retains the power to elicit a variety of decodings. The life of messages caught in the whirlwind of mass production and mass consumption, including the life of the poetic message whenever it is sold as a commodity, is much more varied and unpredictable than we might think in our moments of greatest discouragement. Even the most indiscriminate and naïve superimposition of codes and decodings inevitably involves an exchange between message and addressee that cannot be reduced to a simple scheme—an exchange that will remain forever open to investigation, exploitation, and renewal. It is here that tastes are determined and works are rediscovered, despite the thoughtless brutality of a daily consumerism that seems to reduce every message to sheer noise and to thrive on absent-minded reception.

Kitsch as "Pars Pro Toto" or "Boldinism"

A work of art is a system of relationships among several elements (the material elements that make up the object, the system of references that underlies the work, the system of psychological reactions that the work provokes and coordinates) occurring at different levels (the level of visual or sonic rhythms, the level of plot, the level of ideological content, and so on).²¹

The unifying characteristic of this structure, its aesthetic quality, is that it always appears organized according to a recognizable procedure, "the way of forming" that constitutes the *style* of a work and that reflects the author's personality as well as his or her historical and cultural context.²² Once it is recognized as an organic work, the artistic structure allows for the identification of stylistic elements that we shall here call *stylemes*. Given the unitary character of the structure, each styleme possesses characteristics that connect it to the other stylemes and to the fundamental structure—so much so, that a styleme is enough to suggest the structure of the entire

work, just as it is always possible to reconnect a severed limb to a mutilated statue.

The successful work of art becomes a model and invites imitation. This can occur in two different ways. In the first case, the work of art offers itself as the concrete example of a particular way of forming which may inspire other artists to elaborate their own personal stylistic procedures. In the second case, the work of art provides a whole generation of exploiters with the stylemes necessary to evoke the characteristics of a particular context even after they have been extracted from it (if nothing else, as mere mnemonic aids, so that when a consumer recognizes a given styleme he will instinctively remember its origin and attribute its former success to the new context).

Art is often much too complex for the average consumer, who has only so much time to devote to it. At best, he will be able to appreciate only its most obvious features, or to interpret it according to some formula, the pale ghost of a previous interpretation. So why not help him out by providing him with fragmentary stylemes that have proved particularly effective? If Poe's "tintinnabulation of the bells" has had a strong impact on the collective mind, then why not employ it to advertise a detergent? No matter how successful it is, the ad will never be considered as an aesthetic experience.

Stravinsky's work is full of classical citations, which, openly acknowledged as such, become crucial elements of his compositions, to be reckoned with in any interpretation. This is also the case with collages and "polymaterial" collage paintings, in which the various items that are attached to the canvas are meant to refer back to their origins.

But one of the most salient characteristics of Kitsch is its inability to fully assimilate a citation into a new context. The borrowed styleme sticks out of its new context (which is too shaky to support it, too diverse to integrate with it) like a sore thumb, and yet it is never acknowledged as an intentional citation. Quite the contrary, it is palmed off as the real thing, an original invention. This is why I would like to define Kitsch in structural terms, as a styleme that has been abstracted from its original context and inserted into a context whose general structure does not possess the same characters of homogeneity and necessity as the original's, while the result is proposed as a freshly created work capable of stimulating new experiences.

We find a typical example of this sort of procedure in the work of a painter justly famous with the average public of his time: Giovanni Boldini.

Boldini was a well-known portraitist, a ladies' painter, the creator of portraits that have earned their owners prestige and pleasure. In other words, Boldini's art was in demand. The beautiful woman (be she noble or simply a member of the haute bourgeoisie) who commissions her portrait is not interested in acquiring a work of art; what she wants is a flattering reminder of the indisputable fact that she is a beautiful woman. To achieve this end, Boldini constructed his paintings by the book, with the specific intent of producing the desired effect. The naked parts of his women are painted according to all the canons of a refined naturalism: pleasantly plump, suggestively creamy, teasingly flushed. Their lips are full and wet, their flesh eminently touchable; the look in their eyes can be sweet, daring, malicious, or dreamy, but it is always straightforward, keen, and fixed on the viewer. These women do not evoke an abstract idea of beauty, nor do they turn it into a pretext for formal digressions; they represent specific women, to such an extent that the viewer will end up desiring them. Cléo de Mérode's nudity is meant to excite; Princess Bibesco's shoulders are offered to the desire of the viewer; Marthe Regnier's sex appeal invites direct contact.

But the moment Boldini moves on to paint the clothes of these women, the moment he moves from the cleavage to the corset, and from this to the folds of the skirt, and from these to the background itself, he abandons all pictorial gastronomy to venture into the realm of art: the contours are no longer as precise, the colors glance off the canvas in luminous strokes, things are blobs of paint, objects melt in the light. The lower portion of Boldini's paintings is impressionistic. Here he is clearly trying to be avant-garde, quoting from contemporary painting. If the upper part of his paintings is sheer gastronomy, the lower part is art. Those desirable throats and faces rise out of a pictorial corolla that is there only to be looked at. The client need not feel ill at ease for having been displayed as a courtesan: the rest of her figure aims only to please the spirit, to provoke a purer kind of appreciation, to produce a higher form of enjoyment. Both client and viewers are reassured: not only can they experience art, but they can also respond to it with their senses,

which was not so easy to do with Renoir's impalpable women, or with Seurat's asexual silhouettes. The average consumer consumes his own lie.

But he consumes it as an ethical falsehood, a social falsehood, a psychological falsehood, since in fact it is a structural falsehood. Boldini's paintings are a perfect example of a context that is unable to assimilate the borrowed stylemes. The formal disproportion between the upper and lower parts of his paintings is indisputable. His women are stylematic sirens, to be consumed from the waist up and looked at from the waist down. There is absolutely no formal reason why the painter should change his style as he moves from the face to the feet. The only possible explanation here is that clearly the face was painted to satisfy the demands of the client and the clothes to satisfy the ambitions of the painter, if it weren't for the fact that even the clothes are painted to satisfy the clients, if nothing else by reassuring them that only a respectable face could possibly emerge from such a commendable dress.

The term Kitsch does not apply only to the kind of art that aims at producing an immediate effect; other forms of art, and other respectable activities, have a similar aim. Nor does it simply designate a formal imbalance, since that is a characteristic of most ugly works. Nor does it refer only to the kind of work that has borrowed stylemes which have previously appeared in a different context, since this can happen without lapsing into bad taste. Kitsch refers to the kind of work that tries to justify its provocative ends by assuming the garb of an aesthetic experience, by palming itself off as art.

At times Kitsch can occur, as it were, unawares, as an unwitting and almost pardonable error. These cases are particularly interesting because they display a very obvious mechanism.

Let's take the example of Edmondo de Amicis, a minor Italian author who has unconsciously succeeded in turning a Manzonian styleme to laughable effect. The "borrowed" styleme concludes a famous passage in Manzoni's story of the nun of Monza. The pages that precede it give a lengthy account of the terrible events that have led Gertrude to embrace the wrong vocation. Having succeeded in taming her rebellious nature, she has now resigned herself to being a nun. Or so the reader thinks, until suddenly Egidio makes his unexpected, and fatal, appearance on the scene: "One of his win-

dows overlooked a small courtyard which formed part of Gertrude's quarters. Noticing her once or twice as she passed through the courtyard, or strolled idly round it, he found the difficulty and the wickedness of the enterprise an attraction rather than a deterrent and plucked up his courage to speak to her. The poor wretch answered."²³ Pages and pages of criticism have been devoted to the lapidary efficacy of the last sentence: "La sventurata rispose." The sentence is extremely simple—three words, an article, an adjectival noun, and a verb—and yet, for all its concision, it manages to tell readers all they need to know about Gertrude's response, the complexity of her character, and the author's own moral and emotional response to it. The word "sventurata" is at once a condemnation and an apology; in its role as subject of the sentence, it defines both the character and her entire life, past, present, and future. The verb is anything but dramatic: "rispose"—"answered." It informs us generally about her reaction without telling us anything about the tenor of her answer or its intensity. But this is precisely the reason the sentence is so powerful, so expressive in its suggestion of the abysses of wickedness that that simple gesture implies and discloses—the gesture of a nun who, we now realize, was only waiting, albeit unconsciously, for a spark to explode into rebellion.

The sentence occurs at the right moment, to conclude a lengthy accumulation of details with a funereal note that strikes us as an epitaph. A marvelous example of stylistic economy. Was Edmondo De Amicis aware of it while he was writing one of the most memorable pages of his book *Cuore*? Maybe not, but the analogy is there and deserves some attention. Franti, the bad boy who has been expelled from school, returns to his classroom accompanied by his mother. The headmaster does not send him away because he feels sorry for the woman. She's disheveled, bedraggled, sopping wet. But obviously the author does not think these details are sufficient to produce the desired effect. So he has the poor woman launch into a heart-rending speech, interspersed with loud sobs and exclamation points, in which she tells the headmaster her sad story—violent husband and all. As if this were still not enough, fearing that the reader may still fail to get the picture, the author then wallows in a short description of the woman's exit: she is pale and bowed, her tattered shawl drags on the floor, her head trembles, she can be heard coughing all the way down the stairs.

At this point, as may well be expected, the headmaster turns to young Franti and tells him "with earth-shaking vehemence, 'Franti, you are killing your mother!' Everybody turned to look at Franti. And that rascal smiled." The styleme that concludes this passage is very similar to that used by Manzoni. "E quell'infame rispose": here, too, we have an adjectival noun as the subject and a verb in the past tense. But this is as far as the similarity goes. Given the context in which it appears, this phrase has an altogether different import. First of all, it occurs precisely at the moment the reader is expecting a *coup de théâtre*, both to put an end to the scene and to provide some relief to his overwrought emotions. Second, the adjectival noun that represents the subject is so loaded with condemnation that it becomes almost comic when compared to the boy's actual misdeeds. And third, the verb "smiled" is not nearly so allusive and ambiguous as Manzoni's "rispose." Franti's smile, at this particular point, is the evidence of his cruelty. It says everything there is to say and as definitely as it could be said. This sentence, unlike Manzoni's, does not lead anywhere. This is the way melodrama ends, and shows how a successful styleme can be wasted and corrupted into Kitsch. The only mitigating circumstance in De Amicis's case is that he may have done it unintentionally.

When the intention is obvious, then we have a flagrant example of Kitsch, the kind of Kitsch that is typical of Midcult. Kitsch is Cubism applied to sacred art, as if a geometric Madonna were more appealing to modern taste than its Renaissance counterpart. Kitsch is the winged figure that adorns the hood of a Rolls Royce, a Hellenistic touch meant to evoke the prestige of an object that should instead obey more honest aerodynamic and utilitarian criteria. Kitsch is the Volkswagen beetle that flaunts the hood of a Rolls Royce or the stripes of a swanky sports car. Kitsch is the transistor radio with an inordinately long antenna, quite useless to its reception but necessary to its prestige. Kitsch is the sofa with a chintz cover reproducing Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*, a tea set bearing the effigy of Botticelli's Venus, a bar with decor à la Kandinsky.

The Malayan Leopard

Between the poetic message that invites the reader to enjoy the pleasure of discovery and the Kitsch object that imitates the discov-

ery of pleasure, there are several other kinds of messages, from the ones intended for mass consumption—with no artistic aims or presumptions—to artisanal messages which are meant to stimulate various kinds of experiences and aesthetic emotions and which, in order to attain their ends, borrow methods and stylemes from avant-garde art and then insert them, though without vulgarizing them, into a mixed context aimed at producing various effects as well as at creating an interpretive experience. Because of this double function, such a message can often acquire a particular structure and fulfill a useful task. Between this kind of message and a real poetic message there is the same difference that Elio Vittorini finds between "consumer goods" and "means of production." But often a message that aspires to a poetic function, though it may satisfy the fundamental conditions of this type of communication, reveals a certain imbalance, some structural instability, whereas the message that aims solely at honestly pleasing its public, at being a marketable commodity, often achieves a nearly perfect balance. This indicates that, in the first case, despite the clarity of its intentions, the work is a failure, or at least only a partial success, whereas in the second case we have such a successful commodity that the consumer can even appreciate the perfection of its structure; the commodity has managed to revitalize old stylemes in an effective manner. In this instance, we have a singular phenomenon of recovery whereby a commodity becomes a real work of art which can propose, for the first time in a stimulating fashion, certain ways of forming that others had unsuccessfully tried before. Thus, we have a dialectic between a kind of art that aims at producing original experiences and another kind that aims at the establishment of acquired procedures; in this dialectic it is often the latter that fulfills the fundamental conditions of a poetic message, whereas the former is only a courageous attempt at fulfillment.

Of course, each case deserves a thorough critical investigation. Once again, aesthetic thought can define the optimal conditions for a communicative experience but cannot judge particular cases.

All I wanted to do here, however, was stress the gradations which, within the same circuit of cultural consumption, allow us to distinguish between works of discovery, works of mediation, commodities, and pseudo-artworks—in other words, between avant-garde culture, Masscult, Midcult, and Kitsch.

To further clarify these distinctions, let's look at four examples from literature. In the first, Marcel Proust describes a woman, Albertine, and the impression she makes on the narrator, Marcel, the first time he sees her. Proust is not trying to whet the appetite of his reader; rather, he is looking for a new way to broach an old situation. The subject is banal (the meeting between a man and a woman and the man's response to it), but Proust wants to elaborate a new approach to banal events.

To begin with, he refuses to stake everything on a description of Albertine. Instead, he shows her to us little by little, not as an individual but rather as part of an indivisible whole, a group of girls whose features, smiles, and gestures keeps fusing into a continuous stream of images. To reinforce this sense of fluidity, he uses an impressionistic style in which, even when he describes "*un ovale blanc*" ("a pallid oval"), "*des yeux noirs*" ("black eyes"), "*des yeux verts*" ("green eyes"), the somatic information loses all power of sensual evocation to become one note in a chord (and, in fact, he sees the group of girls as an ensemble "*confus comme une musique où je n'aurais pas su isoler et reconnaître au moment de leur passage les phrases, distinguées mais oubliées aussitôt après*" ("confused as a piece of music in which I should not have been able to isolate and identify at the moment of their passage the successive phrases, no sooner distinguished than forgotten"). It is difficult to cite passages from this description precisely because it stretches over a number of pages and cannot be reduced to a nucleus of representations; it slowly brings us to recognize Albertine, but always with the feeling that our attention, as well as that of the author, might have missed its real aim. The reader fends his way through the images as one would through a jungle; he is not as struck by the "*joues bouffies et roses*," ("plump and rosy cheeks") and the "*teint bruni*" ("dark complexion") as he is surprised at his inability to distinguish even one desirable face among the girls, who "*mettaient entre leurs corps indépendants et séparés, tandis qu'ils avançaient lentement, une liaison invisible, mais harmonieuse comme une même ombre chaude, une même atmosphère, faisant d'eux un tout aussi homogène en ses parties qu'il était différent de la foule au milieu de laquelle se déroulait lentement leur cortège*" ("established between their independent and separate bodies, as slowly they advanced, a bond invisible but harmonious, like a single warm shadow, a single

atmosphere, making of them a whole as homogeneous in its parts as it was different from the crowd through which their procession gradually wound").

Of course, if we chose to analyze all the expressions one by one, we would find all the elements necessary to make up a fragment of Kitsch, but Proust's adjectives are never aimed at a precise object, and even less at exciting a precise emotion; nor do they create a vague aura of lyricism, because, though the reader is invited to untangle the web of impressions that the passage offers him, he is also constantly expected to dominate these impressions, to be at once receptive and critical, and never to abandon himself to the personal feelings evoked by the context, since they must remain, above all, the feeling of the context. At a particular moment, Marcel is struck by the brown eyes of one of the girls, by the "rayon noir" ("dark ray") that strikes him and troubles him. But the impression is immediately countered by a reflection: "Si nous pensions que les yeux d'une telle fille ne sont qu'une brillante rondelle de mica, nous ne serions pas avides de connaître et d'unir à nous sa vie" ("If we thought that the eyes of a girl like that were merely two glittering sequins of mica, we should not be athirst to know her and to unite her life to ours"). Just a momentary halt, and then the discourse continues, no longer to refuse the emotion but rather to comment on it, to delve into it. Our reading is never allowed to follow a single thread. The passage refuses to hypnotize us. Its suggestiveness is not meant to fascinate us but rather to spur us into interpretive activity.²⁴

But if, instead of being described by Marcel, the meeting were described by an honest artisan for a public eager to be charmed, troubled, soothed, and hypnotized, we would have something quite different. This is what happens to Sandokan, the Tiger of Malaya, when, in Emilio Salgari's *The Tigers of Monpracem*, he first meets Marianna Guillonk, better known as the Pearl of Labuan:

He had barely uttered these words than the Lord was back in the room. He was not alone. Behind him, barely touching the rug, advanced a splendid creature, at whose sight Sandokan was unable to repress an exclamation of surprise and admiration.

She was a girl of sixteen or seventeen, small but slender and elegant, with a superb build, and a waist so slim that a single

hand would have sufficed to encircle it. Her complexion was as rosy and fresh as that of a freshly bloomed flower. Her little head was admirable, her eyes were as blue as sea water, her forehead was incomparably pure and, below this, stood out the sharp outline of two gently arched brows that almost touched.

A blond mane fell, in picturesque disorder, like a rain of gold, over the white corset that covered her breasts.

At the sight of that woman, who looked so much like a child, the pirate was shaken by a shiver that went straight to the bottom of his soul.

No need to comment on this passage: all the mechanisms necessary to produce an immediate effect are there, both in the description of Marianna and in the reaction of Sandokan. On the other hand, this is sheer artisanship with no artistic pretensions; Emilio Salgari never thought he was producing art.²⁵ All he wanted to do was provide his public with a means of escape, with an attractive dream. His prose needn't be interpreted; it only has to be read. His work is an honest expression of Masscult, too honest to be considered Kitsch. We shall let the pedagogues determine whether the emotions it fosters are good or bad for our youth, or whether its style is appropriate for a respectable high school canon—which generally seems to lean either toward the classics or toward sheer Kitsch.

Let's now take the case of an author with both taste and culture who, out of choice or vocation, decides to provide his public with a product that is at once dignified but accessible, able to produce an effect and yet above the level of Masscult. His approach to the same situation (a meeting between a man and a woman) will be rather ambivalent: on the one hand, he will want to create a character (the woman) capable of stirring the emotions and the fantasy of his readers; on the other, a sense of propriety will bid him control his words by creating a certain amount of critical distance. This is probably how he would describe the meeting between Sandokan and Marianna:

The second lasted five minutes; then the door opened and in came Marianna. The first impression was of dazed surprise. The Guillonk family stood still, their breath taken away; Sandokan could even feel the veins pulsing in his temples. Under

the first shock from her beauty, the men were incapable of noticing or analyzing its defects, which were numerous; there were to be many forever incapable of this critical appraisal.

She was tall and well made, on an ample scale. Her skin looked as if it had the flavor of fresh cream, which it resembled; her childlike mouth, that of strawberries. Under a mass of raven hair, curling in gentle waves, her green eyes gleamed motionless as those of statues, and like them a little cruel. She was moving slowly, making her wide white skirt rotate around her, and emanating from her whole person was the invincible calm of a woman sure of her beauty.

This gastronomic description reveals greater stylistic economy and a better sense of rhythm, but despite the unquestionable *concinitas* of the passage, absent from the previous one, the communicative procedure is very similar to that used by Salgari. However, the authorial interference in the middle of the passage employs the same styleme used by Proust in the description of Albertine's eyes. It likewise calls into question the effect the author has just suggested. But Proust wouldn't have deigned to write anything so direct and unequivocal, and Salgari would have never been able to moderate his words so cleverly. Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa fits perfectly between the two. The quoted excerpt is in fact a passage from *The Leopard*,²⁶ in which I have replaced the names of Angelica, the Salinas, and Tancredi with names borrowed from Salgari's book. Angelica's appearance at Donnafugata is structured like the perfect Midcult product, in which, however, the contamination between Masscult stylemes and Hicult allusions does not degenerate into a grotesque pastiche. This passage is not engaged in discovery, as Proust's was, but is nevertheless a perfect example of dignified, well-balanced prose, perfectly suited to the edification of our youth. The borrowed styleme is used with discretion. The result is a commodity that will please without exciting, and that will provoke a certain kind of critical participation without entirely polarizing the attention of the reader onto the structure of the message. Obviously, the passage is not the entire book, but it is an eloquent sample of it. The success of this work is perfectly explained by these structural characteristics, and yet its success would not be enough to define it as either a product of Midcult or of Kitsch. This work is a commodity that also has the advantage of having been

able to tackle a series of sociopolitical issues, which, despite their notoriety, had never reached such a wide readership in such a clear form.

The Leopard is an excellent commodity but not quite a product of Kitsch. No cross-contamination is ever quite so successful as Kitsch, and the thirst for prestige is much more obvious. The following passage is a perfect example of this last category, the basest.

Ray Bradbury, famous among the mid-intelligentsia for being the only science-fiction author to have produced literary works (which in a sense is true, since instead of writing honest sci-fi stories he is always trying to give them the appearance of art by using an explicitly "lyrical" style), once wrote a novella for *Playboy*. As everybody knows, *Playboy* is a magazine that has made its fortune by publishing glossy photos of nude women in more or less enticing postures. Its emphasis is on the excellence of the product it offers, not on its artistic value—an all too common alibi of pornographic publications. To this extent, *Playboy* is not a Kitsch product. Unfortunately, however, *Playboy* has cultural aspirations. Its aim is to be the *New Yorker* of libertines and good-timers, and to this end it invites the collaboration of famous authors who, in the name of tolerance and humor, seldom disdain the improbable combination with the rest of the magazine. Ironically, although *Playboy* seeks this collaboration in order to raise its status and to allay the uneasy conscience of some of its readers by providing them with a cultural alibi ("but it has very good articles"), this is precisely what turns it, as well as the hapless tale of the hapless contributor, into Kitsch. Of course, this is not exactly what happened to Ray Bradbury, since he was already Kitsch to begin with.

Bradbury's novella likewise tells of a meeting between two people. Not between a man and a woman, however, since that situation is obviously much too banal for an author who's so keen on producing "art." So in his story *In a Season of Calm Weather*, Bradbury tells us of the meeting, and the ensuing passion, between a man and a work of art. Bradbury's hero is an American who decides to spend his summer near Vallauris, on the French Riviera, in order to be close to his idol: Picasso. His devoted wife accompanies him. Why Picasso? Because Picasso means art, modernity, and prestige. Because Picasso is very widely known, and because his work, totally fetishized, no longer needs to be interpreted. Picasso is the perfect choice.

One evening, toward sunset, our hero is dreamily strolling along a deserted shore, when, at some distance, he notices a small man busy drawing figures on the sand with a stick. Needless to say, it is Picasso. But our hero does not realize it until, having walked closer, he can see the figures drawn on the sand. Spellbound, he watches the little man draw. He doesn't say a word, doesn't even dare breathe lest the vision vanish. It does, eventually, when, having finished his drawing, Picasso walks away. The lover wants to keep the work, but the tide is rising.

Since a summary cannot possibly do justice to the style of the story, this is what our hero sees as he watches the little old man draw on the sand:

For there on the flat shore were pictures of Grecian lions and Mediterranean goats and maidens with flesh of sand like powdered gold and satyrs piping on hand-carved horns and children dancing, strewing flowers along and along the beach with lambs gamboling after and musicians skipping to their harps and lyres, and unicorns racing youths toward distant meadows, woodlands, ruined temples and volcanos. Along the shore in a never-broken line, the hand, the wooden stylus of this man bent down in fever and raining perspiration, scribbled, ribboned, looped around over and up, across, in, out, stitched, whispered, stayed, then hurried on as if this traveling bacchanal must flourish to its end before the sun was put out by the sea. Twenty, thirty yards or more the nymphs and dryads and summer fountains sprung up in unraveled hieroglyph. And the sand, in the dying light, was the color of molten copper on which was now slashed a message that any man in any time might read and savor down the years. Everything whirled and poised in its own wind and gravity. Now wine was being crushed from under the grape-blooded feet of dancing vintners' daughters, now steaming seas gave birth to coin-sheathed monsters while flowered kites strewed scent on blowing clouds . . . now . . . now . . . now . . .

The artist stopped.

Here again, there's no need for comment. The reader is clearly told what he must see and what he must appreciate—and how—in Picasso's work. Better yet, the passage gives him a quintessence, a summary, a concentrate of Picasso's entire oeuvre, or rather, of the

more facile and decorative period of his oeuvre—which, of course, only serves to make us (or those of us who hadn't yet done so) realize that even Picasso may not have been totally impervious to Kitsch. On the one hand, Bradbury interprets Picasso by means of the purest of codes (for the most part reduced to the cult of the arabesque and a series of facile connections between stereotyped figures and trite emotions); on the other, he constructs his passage by clumsily stitching together a number of stylemes borrowed from the decadents (in it, one can hear faint echoes of Pater, Wilde, the earliest epiphanic Joyce—the bird girl!—and so on) simply in order to accumulate effects. And yet, the main intention behind this message is self-reflexive: the reader is supposed to react to its style, to be awed by an author "who can write so well."

To the Midcult reader, the overall impression will be one of "intense lyrical tension." In other words, the story is not only eminently comestible but also quite beautiful; more than that, it succeeds in conveying a sense of Beauty. The difference between this kind of beauty and that of the nudes that surround it, in *Playboy*, is minimal but significant: whereas the nudes bluntly refer to a reality that not only exists but may also have a telephone number, Bradbury's story tries to cloak its true nature behind the worn veil of "art." Its very hypocrisy is enough to characterize Bradbury's piece as Kitsch.

Conclusion

Thus, we have looked at all the possibilities and found a definition for Kitsch within the context of aesthetics.

Yet let's assume that a reader, excited by Bradbury's novella, would make it his duty to discover Picasso and, confronted for the first time with one of the master's works, would experience something so personal as to quite obliterate the initial literary stimulus, something that would draw him into the world of the painting and compel him to understand the way in which it was formed. Wouldn't this be enough to make us wary of all the theoretical definitions concerning good and bad taste?

The ways of God are infinite, as some would say, forgetting that even illnesses can bring us close to God. But the duty of a doctor is to diagnose and cure them.

We should suspect, *a priori*, every investigation of mass media that tries to reach a definitive conclusion. Within the anthropological situation of mass culture anything can happen, things can be turned upside down in no time; reception can change the physiognomy of transmission, and vice versa. At times, Kitsch is on the side of the message, at times on the side of the receiver's intention, and, more often than not, on that of the sender who tries to palm his product off for something it is not. Kitsch is Addinsell's *Warsaw Concerto*, with its accumulation of pathetic effects and imitative suggestions ("Hear that? Those are planes dropping bombs"), and its heavy-handed use of Chopin; just as Kitsch is the appreciation of this particular musical passage as described in Malaparte's *La pelle* (The skin). The notes of this fragment are heard during a reunion of British soldiers attended by the author, who at first thinks they are part of a Chopin concerto. He is set straight by one of the officers who, with great satisfaction, informs him that "Addinsel is our Chopin." In this sense, all the music known as "rhythmic-symphonic," because of the way in which it tries to amalgamate dance music with the daring of jazz and the dignity of classical symphonies, produces effects similar to those of Addinsel's piece. But when the composer has a certain knack, he may be able to create a product with a structure so particular as to completely avoid all suspicion of Kitsch and become an acceptable new product, the pleasant popularization of a higher musical universe. Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* is such a piece of music because of the originality of its composition and the freshness with which it translates popular American material into unexpectedly new forms. But the moment this composition is played in a traditional concert hall, by a conductor in tails, for the kind of audience one commonly finds at a classical concert, it inevitably becomes Kitsch because it tries to stimulate reactions that are not suited to either its intentions or its capacities. It is decoded according to an alien code.

Gershwin's dance music, in contrast, will never be Kitsch for the very simple reason that it has always done, and still does, what it set out to do, and does it to perfection. Gershwin never saw his *Lady Be Good* as anything but a means of escape, a stimulus to dance, and that is precisely why he wrote it and how he sold it. At which point one may legitimately wonder whether this kind of escape is conducive to a balanced life, or whether the kind of love

inspired by syncopation is anything more than a superficial flirtation. But this is an altogether different question. If we are ready to accept a situation in which this sort of music is capable of eliciting a particular kind of physiological and emotional excitement, then we have to admit that Gershwin's music fulfills its task both tastefully and appropriately.

Similarly, the above quoted passage from *The Leopard*, very honest in its intention to entertain its public, may seem exceedingly pretentious when it is proposed as a poetic message, as the original revelation of certain aspects of reality that had presumably remained unexplored until its appearance. But in this case, the responsibility of having produced Kitsch is not so much the author's as the reader's—or the critic's, if he is the one who has decoded the message in such a way as to present the mouth with the taste of strawberries, the eyes as green as those of statues, and the nocturnal hue of the hair as the stylemes of a message whose worth resides in the originality of its vision.

Given the spread of mass culture, it would be impossible to say that this sequence of mediations and loans is a one-way street: Kitsch is not the only borrower. Today, it is often avant-garde culture which, reacting against the density and the scope of mass culture, borrows its own stylemes from Kitsch. This is what Pop Art does when it chooses the most vulgar and pretentious graphic symbols of advertising and turns them into the objects of morbid and ironic attention by blowing them up out of all proportion and hanging them on the walls of a museum. This is the avant-garde's revenge on Kitsch, as well as a lesson for it, because in most cases the avant-garde artist shows the producer of Kitsch how to insert an extraneous styleme into a new context without abandoning good taste. Objectivized by a painter, on a canvas, both the Coca-Cola trademark and a comic strip fragment acquire a meaning they did not previously have.²⁷

But even here, Kitsch does not waste any time taking its revenge on the avant-garde, by borrowing its procedures and its stylemes for its ads, where once again the only thing that matters is the production of an effect and the display of a higher level of taste. And this is only one episode in a phenomenon that is typical of every modern industrial society, of the rapid succession of standards whereby even in the field of taste every novelty is always the source of a future bad habit.

This is how the dialectic between avant-garde and mass production (which involves Kitsch as well as most products destined for practical uses) reveals both its worrisome rhythm and its possibilities for recovery. But it also allows for the possibility of new procedural interventions, of which the last one that should ever be tried, and the falsest, is the restoration of an apparent adherence to the timeless value of Beauty, which is generally only a cover for the mercenary face of Kitsch.

X

Series and Structure

Structure and "Series"

In his introduction to *The Raw and the Cooked*, Claude Lévi-Strauss examines the differences between two cultural attitudes which he terms "structural thought" and "serial thought." By "structural thought" he means the philosophical stance that underlies the structuralist method of investigation in the human sciences; by "serial thought" he means the philosophy that underlies post-Webern musical aesthetics—in particular, Pierre Boulez's poetics.

This opposition deserves some attention for two main reasons. First of all, when Lévi-Strauss speaks of serial thought, the object of his polemics is not just the so-called *Neue Musik* but the whole attitude of the avant-garde and of contemporary experimentalism in art as well as in literature. In fact, his critique of serialism is close to the critique of abstract and nonrepresentational painting already sketched in his *Entretiens*—yet another instance of Lévi-Strauss's mistrust for all those art forms presuming to challenge the traditional systems of expectation and formation which Western culture has considered archetypical and "natural" since the Middle Ages. Second, by "structural thought" and "serial thought" Lévi-Strauss means not simply two different methodological stances but two different visions of the world. A detailed analysis of this text is therefore crucial to a proper understanding of the direction structuralism takes when it presents itself as a philosophy.

What are the distinctive features of serial thought? As Boulez defines them, in the essay to which Lévi-Strauss refers:

Serial thought has become a polyvalent thought process . . . As such, it is in complete contrast to classical thought, according to which form is a preexisting entity and at the same time a

17. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, tr. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 240.

18. In *I Novissimi*, Milano, 1961. Whereas Sanguineti fends his way through the swamp of culture making use of all the words and phrases that have been fatally compromised by tradition, Nanni Balestrini prefers to go through the daily swamp of newspapers, commercials, and common talk. Those who see Balestrini's experiments (his handwritten poems, not his electronic compositions) as expressions of Dadaism forget that when Dada pulls words apart and randomly glues them back together elsewhere, its aim is to provoke the reader and stimulate his mind by replacing the order of his reasoning with an unexpected and fertile disorder. Balestrini, instead, maintains that he does not create disorder by upsetting an order but rather discovers this disorder in place of order.

8. Two Hypotheses about the Death of Art

1. Eco is referring to what in Italy was known as "idealistic criticism," according to which Dante's *Paradiso* was less "artistic" than his *Inferno* since it dealt with theological (that is, "conceptual") matter, whereas the latter was concerned with more "human" passions.—*Translator's note*.

2. To verify this point, Nanni Balestrini and I once decided to write a precise and accurate "description of seven lost, or never written, poems," in which we would give an exhaustive explanation of their stylistic features, the structure of their lines, their use of blanks, their lexical choices, punctuation, use of foreign or invented words, and so on. Then we planned to add a critical essay explaining the meaning of the poems, and why their structure was so important that, once described, it was unnecessary to write the poems. This would not have been a game. Quite the contrary. In fact, the idea was so serious and fraught with consequences that it immediately invalidated our project of writing either the description of the poems or the essay, since the very idea of such a kind of writing was already more meaningful and important than the writing itself. In short, we started a sort of circular process that would never have ended had I not put a sudden halt to it by deciding to write this essay, which, being a description of the very circularity of this situation, has become its meta-discourse. But the essay has managed to elude the centripetal pull of that vertiginous situation, just as its epigraph manages to remain on the brink of the oneiric abyss it evokes. In other words, this essay is the direct result of the terror felt at the mere contemplation of such an abyss.

3. "Anticipazioni sulla 'morte dell'arte'" [Anticipations on the death of art], in *Nuove prospettive della pittura italiana* (Bologna: Edizioni Alfa, 1962).

I would like to correct Raffa's point as follows: rather than making a distinction between the works and the doctrinal surplus that justifies them, we could speak (at least insofar as the more successful ones are concerned) of works that are the doctrinal communication of themselves, their own justification, their own surplus.

4. Milan: Ceschina, 1962.

5. Francesco de Sanctis, "Alla sua donna" (Torino: Einaudi, 1960; orig. pub. Leopardi, 1855), p. 400.

6. I am thinking of Luigi Pareyson's "aesthetics of formativity," and, in particular, of the relationship he draws between style, content, and matter in art, and of the idea of critical interpretation as a penetration, mediated by congeniality, into a physical universe of formed matter in which every procedural project would find its solution in a *modo di formare*, a particular "formal approach." When Pareyson defines art as "formativity for formativity's sake," he is not escaping into the irresponsible realm of formalistic (not to say calligraphic) complacency; nor is he excluding the possibility that an artist may be motivated by very precise and compelling moral and political ideas; nor is he excluding the possibility that these ideas may in fact lend value, taste, and vigor to the work. Rather, he is trying to restrict the context of the artistic process to those formal activities that do not want to turn the art object into the pretext for an end that's essentially extraneous to the object itself (whether this end be the presentation of a poetic, or a prayer, or mere propaganda). According to Pareyson, to form artistically means to lend value to all the elements that participate in this form, so that they may be appreciated, interpreted, and judged as one formed object. An artist can elaborate a poetics on a theoretical level, and the words he will use to do so will be a convenient vehicle for his ideas; but the moment he sets out to produce a work that is also its own poetics, he must form this poetics in order to give it an organic consistency which, in turn, will allow it to be enjoyed as object and not as an abstract model.

9. The Structure of Bad Taste

1. Ludwig Giesz, in *Phaenomenologie des Kitsches* (Heidelberg: Rothe Verlag, 1960), suggests a few etymologies for the term. According to the first, it would date back to the second half of the nineteenth century, when the American tourists who visited Munich and wanted to buy a cheap painting would ask for a "sketch." As a result, the German term *Kitsch* started to be applied to all the knickknacks bought by people eager to undergo an "aesthetic experience." On the other hand, the verb *kitschen* (to gather mud along the road) already existed in the Mecklenburg dialect. The same verb could also mean "to retouch furniture in order to give it a

'vintage' look," whereas the verb *verkitschen* means "to sell cheaply."

2. Walther Killy, *Deutscher Kitsch* (Göttingen: Vandenhock & Ruprecht, 1962). Killy's essay introduces an anthology of characteristic fragments drawn out of German literature. The authors he used for his pastiche are, in order: Werner Jansen, Nataly von Eschtruth, Reinhold Muschler, Agnes Günther, Rainer Maria Rilke, Nathanael Jünger.

3. Hermann Broch, "Einige Bemerkungen zum Problem des Kitsches," in *Dichten und Erkennen*, vol. 1 (Zurich, 1955). Translated as "Notes on the Problem of Kitsch," in *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste*, ed. Gillo Dorfles (New York: Universe Books, 1969).

4. Luigi Pareyson, in "I teorici dell'Ersatz," *De Homine* 5-6 (1963), a short essay that reiterates the main theoretical issues already discussed in his *Estetica*. In his polemic against the calm recognition of the "digestibility" of the artistic product, Pareyson makes a distinction between the generic "artisticity" that pervades all human work, and art as the "culmination and the climax" of this attitude, as "norm and model," education of taste, proposal of new "ways of forming," intentional forming for form's sake. According to him, the product of the cultural industry would be nothing more than simple expressions of "artisticity," and, as such, subject to both consumption and wear. Of course, among the processes of artisticity, Pareyson does not include all those works of art which, on the basis of a particular poetics, or of the general tendency of a historical period, intentionally aim at the attainment of heteronomous ends (whether pedagogical, political, or utilitarian). In these cases, there is art only insofar as the artist manages to embody his intentions in his formal project, and insofar as the work, though aiming at something outside itself, also manifests itself as a form for its own sake.

5. R. Egenter, *Kitsch und Christenleben* (Ettal, 1950), as quoted by Giesz.

6. Clement Greenberg, "The Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in Dorfles, ed., *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste*.

7. See Chapter 8, "Two Hypotheses about the Death of Art."

8. In his "Salon de 1859," Baudelaire expresses great irritation at photography's ambition to replace art, and exhorts all photographers to confine their activity to the utilitarian recording of images rather than try to infiltrate the realm of the imagination. But is it art that begs industry not to invade its turf, or is it industry that is pushing art out into other fields? On Baudelaire's attitude toward this new situation, see Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1969).

9. See Gerhart D. Wiebe, "Culture d'élite et communications de masse," in *Communications* 3. For the sake of a more rigorous method of investigation, Wiebe proposes a distinction between the characteristics of

art and those of mass communication, even though they are often joined in one product. Except that his notion of the functions of "mass media" seems fairly "integrated": "I would almost go so far as to say that the more popular TV programs fulfill a regulating social and psychological function—that is, they tend to preserve a balance in a context that can be much more turbulent than we think . . . People would not spend so much time watching these programs if they did not satisfy a need, if they did not redress certain distortions, if they did not fulfill certain desires."

10. See Dwight MacDonald, *Against the American Grain* (New York: Random House, 1952), pp. 40-43, and in general the chapter "Masscult and Midcult."

11. T. W. Adorno, "Über den Fetischcharakter in der Musik und die Regression des Hörens," in *Dissonanzen* (Göttingen, 1985).

12. Ibid.

13. See Roman Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 3 (The Hague: Mouton, 1981).

14. As mentioned, the notions of code and decoding can also be applied to nonlinguistic communications—for instance, to visual or musical messages as organizations of perceptual stimuli. But is it possible to decode such messages at a semantic level? This should not be too difficult in the instance of figurative or symbolic painting, since their mimetic nature can entail semantic references as well as iconographic conventions. On the other hand, there could very well be an interpretive code, maybe not quite as cogent as the linguistic system, based on a cultural tradition, in which every color would have a precise referent. As for music, Claude Lévi-Strauss speaks of it as a code because it refers to a precise grammar (whether tonal or dodecaphonic); see G. Charbonnier, *Conversations with Lévi-Strauss*, tr. John and Doreen Weightman (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), pp. 120-121. Yet he realizes that the notion of code does not apply so well to serial music, and therefore he elaborates the hypothesis that, in serial music, grammar operates only as prosody, "since the essential feature of linguistic rules, the feature which makes it possible to express different meanings by means of sounds which in themselves are arbitrary, is that these sounds are part of a system of binary oppositions." In serial music, in contrast, "the idea of opposites remains, but the positions of the notes are not articulated as a system. In this sense, the code would seem to be more expressive than semantic." Lévi-Strauss's objection is important, since it can be applied to abstract painting. But it also applies to tonal music, which is constructed on the basis of a grammatical code that has no semantic dimension.

15. Jakobson, *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, p. 558. The message can communicate precise meanings, but the primary one is the message itself. One

can speak of a "poetic" or "artistic" meaning even in the case of nonsemantic arts. There are artistic messages with very open and imprecise semantic references and a very precise syntactic structure (Jackson Pollock's paintings, for instance). Most of the time, the semantic efficacy of these particular messages depends on the degree of awareness that we bring to their system of contextual relationships. In architecture, for instance, one can speak of the semantic value of a building not only because each of its elements refers to specific functions but also because of the symbolic nature that the general object assumes, in the way it articulates itself structurally and in the way it relates to its urban context; see Gillo Dorfles, "Valori comunicativi e simbolici nell'architettura, nel disegno industriale e nella pubblicità," in *Simbolo, comunicazione, consumo* (Torino: Einaudi, 1962). This can also happen with the formal procedures of music, which often can assume such a precise referential value (to ideological situations, for instance) that they can be said to have a semantic function. And it certainly happens with painting, where even a style can assume (thanks to an interpretive process acquired through tradition) an almost conventionalized significative value. For instance, an art director may agree to illustrate the jacket of a Robbe-Grillet novel with a painting by Mondrian, but he or she would never use the same painting for a book of Beckett plays. In none of these instances, obviously, is the relationship of signifier to signified as precise as it is in spoken language; but this relationship is secondary to a poetic message, just as it is called into question in the structuring of a linguistic message with poetic pretensions. In a poetic message, the structuring of the signs coordinates not only the signifiers but also emotions and perceptions, as is the case in the decorative arts and in music. Thus, when Lévi-Strauss accuses abstract painting of lacking "the essential attribute of the work of art, which is to offer a kind of reality of a semantic nature," he is either confining the notion of art to a certain kind of art, or is simply refusing to recognize that, in a poetic message, the semantic function must be articulated in a different way.

To avoid this dead end, A. A. Moles has developed a distinction between the semantic and the aesthetic aspect of the message, in which the latter is connected to the structuring of its elements. See A. A. Moles, *Information Theory and Esthetic Perception*, tr. Joel E. Cohen (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1966).

16. Jakobson, *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, p. 25. This does not mean that the signifieds (when they are there) do not count. On the contrary, the poetic message so effectively forces us to question the signifieds to which it refers that we often have to return to the message in order to find, in its patterns of signification, the roots of their problematic nature. Even in the case of preexisting signifieds (say, the Trojan War in the *Iliad*), the poetic

message casts a new, richer light on them, thereby becoming a means to further knowledge.

17. The Russian Formalists had already elaborated the postulates of this position before the Prague structuralists. See Victor Erlich, *Russian Formalism* (The Hague: Mouton, 1955).

18. See Chapter 2, "Analysis of Poetic Language."

19. See Dorfles, *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste*.

20. See Umberto Eco, "Di foto fatte sui muri," *Il Verri* 4 (1961); and idem, "Introduction," *I colori del ferro* (Genoa: Italsider, 1963). On the semantic problematics of the "ready made," see Claude Lévi-Strauss in Charbonnier, *Conversations with Lévi-Strauss*. According to Lévi-Strauss, the object pulled from its habitual context and inserted into another context causes a "semantic fission"—that is, it disrupts the usual relationship between signifier and signified. "But this semantic fission also allows for a fusion, because the mere fact of placing this object in contact with other, new objects can reveal some of its latent structural properties."

21. For the notion of the work of art as a "system of systems," see René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973; orig. pub. 1949).

22. For the notion of *modo di formare* ("way of forming"), see Luigi Pareyson, *Esteretica: Teoria della formatività*, 2nd ed. (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1960). See also note 4, above.

23. A. Manzoni, *The Betrothed*, tr. Bruce Penman (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 206.

24. Marcel Proust, *Under a Budding Grove*, tr. C. K. Scott Moncrieff (New York: Random House, 1982).

25. It could be argued that the physical description of characters specifically aimed at exciting the reader is not just characteristic of pulp novels. The great narrative tradition of the nineteenth century did it all the time. On the other hand, there are various ways of doing it. Salgari's description of Marianna is totally "generic"—it has no depth. Her features could be those of any other "heroine." Balzac's descriptions of his characters may at first seem to be similar to those of Salgari, but in fact they are closer to Proust's (even though they could be easily appreciated by Salgari's readers). Balzac describes Colonel Chabert some thirty pages into the novel, when we already know something about the psychology of the character and can thus easily connect each of his physical attributes to some deeper trait—aside from the fact that there is nothing in the description of his face that could be defined as "generic" or that could be applied to other faces. The effect the description produces on the reader is immediately problematized by the rest of the page.

26. Lampedusa's stylemes already have a history that could easily be traced back to Guido da Verona's *Il libro del mio sogno errante*.

27. As instances of Kitsch employing the residue of art, and avant-garde art employing the residue of Kitsch.

It would be interesting to look at the stylistic procedures of both from the point of view of Lévi-Strauss's notion of *bricolage* (see *La pensée sauvage* [Paris: Plon, 1962]). Both avant-garde and Kitsch would then seem to be involved in some kind of reciprocal *bricolage*, avowed in one case (and aiming at the discovery of new dimensions), tacit in the other (and trying to pass for an original invention, "the real thing").

10. Series and Structure

1. Pierre Boulez, *Relevés d'apprenti* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), p. 297.

2. Jean Pouillon, "Présentation," *Les temps modernes* (November 1966), issue titled *Problèmes du structuralisme*.

3. "Ouverture," *The Raw and the Cooked* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), pp. 18-27.

4. *Incontri musicali* 3 (1959).

5. Pierre Schaeffer, *Traité des objets musicaux* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), pp. 300-303.

6. Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, p. 25.

7. Ibid., p. 27.

8. In which case we should probably abandon the Saussurean hypothesis of a code qua constituted *system*, inventory, taxonomy, to approximate a notion of "competence" as a finite mechanism capable of an infinite activity. In relation to this deeper structure, any system, such as the tonal one or the serial one, would be a "superficial" structure—in Chomsky's sense of the word. As concerns the possibility of a "serial" discourse, Chomsky further distinguishes between a creativity that's determined by rules ("competence") and a creativity that changes the rules ("performance"). Of course, the mere possibility of serial thought would automatically call into question the universals of language to which Chomsky refers; on the other hand, as I have already noted, a generative matrix could preside over both the formation and the destructure of rules. Chomsky's work has opened a door to the study of an open combinatorial grammar, but at this particular stage of research it would be premature to translate the propositions of transformational grammar into the broader terms required by a semiological discourse, and particularly so, considering that Chomsky himself has referred to his model—often redefined—as "still rudimentary." See E. H. Lenneberg, "The Formal Nature of Language," in *Biological Foundations of Language* (Melbourne, Fla.: Krieger, 1967), p. 430. I have

also found particularly useful Nicolas Ruwet's suggestions in "Introduction à la grammaire générative," *Langages* 4 (1966). See also Gualtiero Calboli, "Rilevamento tassonomico e 'coerenza' grammaticale," *Rendiconti* (1967): 15-16.

9. Henri Pousseur, "La nuova sensibilità musicale," *Incontri musicali* 2 (1958).

10. *Jupiter, Mars, Quirinus* (Torino: Einaudi, 1955).

11. Desmond Morris, *The Naked Ape* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967).

12. Lucien Sébag, *Marxisme et structuralisme* (Paris: Payot, 1964).

13. Ibid., p. 121.

14. Ibid., p. 123.

15. Ibid., p. 125.

16. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Random House, 1970). After showing how the distinction between "physiocrats" and "utilitarians," in the eighteenth century, can be expressed in the transformation of the same structural scheme, Foucault notes: "Perhaps it would have been simpler to say that the Physiocrats represented the landowners and the 'utilitarians' the merchants and entrepreneurs . . . But though membership of a social group can always explain why such and such a person chose one system of thought rather than another, the condition enabling that system to be thought never resides in the existence of the group" (p. 200).

17. Sébag, *Marxisme et structuralisme*, p. 127.

18. Ibid., p. 128.

19. Ibid., p. 144.

20. Ibid., p. 147.

21. Ibid., p. 148.

22. *Les temps modernes* (March 1965).

23. Ibid., p. 1622.